

CLINGING TO SELF

Notes taken during discussions in Sri Lanka 1979, and with Khun Sujin in Bangkok 1979 specifically in the context of clinging to self.

'All conditioned things (dhamma) are without self (anatta); when one sees this in wisdom, then one becomes bored with this unsatisfactoriness. This is the Path to Purification.

Dhammapada v 279

Phra Dhammadharo pointed out in Sri Lanka that 'on and on and on we have this idea of self and we don't know it.' It seems like 'something' all the time. We really cling to an idea of self more than perhaps we ever considered possible when we first heard of the Buddha's teachings. Phra Dhammadharo also pointed out in Sri Lanka how there is thinking of oneself most the time and thinking of the people close to us. 'It's not calmness at all, it's a kind of subtle greediness, selfishness, not gross perhaps.... but still one thinks mainly of oneself and what one can get, even the kusala that one can get.... getting for oneself more and more and more....' He also pointed out that 'we don't like to be wrong, we don't like to be lacking, we don't like to feel that we are beginners, we don't like to feel that we don't know anything, but this is all clinging too.'

'We cling to some idea we have of what we are. We cling to thinking that we are all right, that we will get by, it doesn't matter if we are not so perfect, if we are not so generous as we could be. It doesn't matter if we gossip from time to time, it doesn't matter. That's clinging and clinging to what we think matters and doesn't matter. That's clinging to the feeling we have at this moment.'

In the 'Udāna' (Verses of Uplift), there is an account of Pasenadi, the Kosalan and Mallikā, the queen. Having concluded between them that there is no one dearer to them than themselves, they went to see the Buddha. The Buddha spoke the following verse of uplift (Ch. V, The Elder Sona, 1):

'The whole wide world we traverse with our thought,
Finding to man nought dearer than the self.
Since aye so dear the self to others is,
Let the self-lover harm no other man.'

However, do we understand the full meaning of what it means to cling to self? It was pointed out that 'there has to be awareness through each of the six doorways and until there is, it's taking each for self.' Phra Dhammadharo reminded us that it's very easy to have misunderstanding about what one thinks to be one-self and Khun Sujin further commented that 'one tries to think only that it's not self, but there is no development of the understanding of the characteristic which appears. When it's not self, what is it? Seeing is not self and visible object is not self, but it's very difficult to have precise understanding, because whenever one sees anything, one sees people and forms. It's a matter of developing.... We have read and listened a lot about the five khandhas, but when we try to be aware, we forget the reality of sankhāra khandha. Sati is anatta, no matter what system one follows. Right awareness arises when there are the right conditions not just by wanting or trying. So don't do anything at all....'

On another occasion, Khun Sujin asks what appears now. The answer is hearing and Khun Sujin replies that 'when one says it's hearing, does one know anything about hearing or just calls it hearing? It's a reality very difficult to sometimes experience. We can say whenever there's hearing that one hears or it's hearing, but it's only a phrase or word, not the right understanding which really discerns that element of hearing which is not self at all and no matter whether we call it hearing or not, it's only a reality which can experience sound. It cannot experience visible object or other objects at all. So at this moment of hearing, hearing is real. There can be awareness of it as an experience. At that moment of being aware and beginning to learn to understand the element of hearing as experience, there cannot be the idea of self mixing in....'

The wrong view of self has been accumulated for so long that even though we understand in theory that there are only different phenomena, no people and things, we keep coming back to our old belief in the self.

We read in the Visuddhimagga (XV11 236) that feeling is a condition for the strong clinging to oneself:

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'Out of selfish affection for feeling after taking pleasure in it when it arises through a visible datum as object, etc., these beings accord much honour to painters, musicians, perfumers, cooks, weavers, distillers of elixirs, physicians, etc., who furnish respectively visible data as object, etc., just as, out of affection for a child they reward the child's nurse after taking pleasure in the child. That is why it should be understood that these three kinds of craving have feeling as their condition.'

Only the āraṇat has eradicated all craving and clinging, although the sotāpanna has eradicated the wrong view of self. We read a little further on in the Visuddhimagga (AVII, 238):

A man in pain for pleasure longs,
And finding pleasure longs for more;
The peace of equanimity
Is counted pleasure too; therefore
The Greatest Sage announced the law
'With feeling as condition, craving',
Since all three feelings thus can be
Conditions for all kinds of craving.
Though feeling is condition, still
Without Inherent-tendency
No craving can arise, and so.
From this the perfect saint is free.

'When one tries to control or do something special so that awareness can arise, there is the clinging to a self that can control. Khun Sujin pointed out that if 'one really understands the reality of anatta, one develops right understanding instead of trying to control.... Otherwise it's only thinking, delaying to begin.' We're so used to thinking in terms of something or self. 'Just the immediate sati can eradicate the clinging. Satipaṭṭhana is delayed and delayed and delayed. When one states one should have something to begin with, it indicates one has wrong view.'.... 'One knows that the beginning is being aware of any reality, so that lobha cannot distract or lead one to other objects. It's this moment of seeing, just this moment. No time to think of other objects or concentrate on other objects.'.... 'When there is the idea of controlling, one forgets conditioned realities.'

Khun Sujin reminded us many times that realities are conditioned. 'What about if there are many moments of awareness without studying, without developing understanding and learning the reality of that object at all? Because now there is seeing and there is hearing. When can one come close to understand that reality as not self? Nāma and rūpa only... The realities are anatta. Some of them are nāma, the elements of experience and some of them are rūpa, not self. But when there is no awareness, no studying, no developing, there is no learning their characteristics as they are. So it's not a matter of trying to do something different from this moment, but developing more understanding, intellectually until that level of understanding can condition right awareness at any time, of any object by conditions.'

Khun Sujin also reminded us that 'one can think one can understand intellectually, but it's not the direct understanding of the characteristic of awareness if awareness does not arise. No matter how much one tries, it's only thinking about I am trying to do such and such thing. This moment can one try to be aware or awareness is aware when it arises? Which is more correct?... Because sometimes one tries very hard to be aware, but there is no awareness, so it's awareness itself which is aware when it arises and there should be more understanding of awareness as anatta. It's conditioned, so one can see it's not self.'.... She was asked what is meant when we are told to develop sati. 'It doesn't mean there should be a self who is trying to develop it, but it means there should be conditions or understanding of the development of satipaṭṭhāna that it will arise by conditions.' Khun Sujin goes on to say that 'some people may think that one should develop dāna or sīla or samātha or think a lot about satipaṭṭhāna so it can condition awareness, but that is still hoping or wishing with the idea of self because this moment of understanding about satipaṭṭhāna or the object of satipaṭṭhāna is saṅkhara khaṇḍha....'

Phra Dhammadhara also pointed out how 'one has to begin at the beginning
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where one maybe almost all the time without awareness. So one doesn't go from not ever having awareness to having uninterrupted awareness. One begins with a moment of awareness. That's all. It can be anytime or any place. So long as we want to have this awareness go on for a long, long time, we are clinging to the awareness just as we cling to all the other objects around us. We want to have a lot of awareness. We want to have no interruptions. We want to control this practice of ours. We want to go somewhere else to get fast results. It's very natural, it's the most natural thing to want to have our understanding as quickly as possible. But this is not the way to be aware at this very moment. We cannot say whether our kamma will allow us to go to places where we would like to be in or not. We cannot say when we get to those places whether the conditions will remain as conducive as we think they are there for what we want to do there.... Our aim is to have detachment from what appears right at this moment and not care how much sati we have....

We can just be aware for this moment and see that what appears is not a person. There's nobody to practise, nobody to get enlightened, nobody with kilesa, just different phenomena, one at a time, now.

It was discussed how we often think in terms of a special place or pattern, taking the place or pattern for something, for self. Khun Sujin urged us to be aware instantly, not after one has looked for this place. She also reminded us that 'finding the suitable place is conditioned. There are 'no shoulds'. Otherwise one will be concerned with 'wanting to do instead of being aware.' Or one will be concerned with 'following the pattern instead of being aware immediately...delaying of satipatthāna.... One is careless when there is no sati. Without understanding, one has the idea of programming...' Khun Sujin also pointed out that maybe one finds what one thinks is the suitable place. 'If there's attachment, can one say that is suitable, because it is just a place for attachment.' While we keep thinking we should do this or that, no matter what one is thinking, it is conditioned. 'In order to attain higher understanding it's impossible not to be aware of thinking. There's one way - the developing of awareness and understanding of realities.'

Whenever we cling to the idea of something or some situation, it's an aspect of clinging to the idea of self. Khun Sujin remarked how 'some people are afraid to watch T.V., but now we are lost in the concepts with no awareness.... Mpha is there whether one watches T.V. or not. While thinking there's much difference between place and situation, thinking makes the difference.'

We are lost in the world of samuti sacca or conventional truths most of the time. Sometimes it's the trying to work out or think which seems most important, because there's so little awareness. I had a cold and didn't want to miss a moment of discussion; again it was thinking of a 'situation'. 'Don't be busy thinking of it (the situation), but develop right understanding. With right understanding, anywhere is the suitable place.'

The only way to know samuti sacca as samuti sacca (conventional truth only), is to know paramatha sacca (absolute truth). 'The only way to realise there is no self is to distinguish nāma from rūpa'. 'Sati can be aware immediately and right understanding can see it as not self. Develop awareness and wisdom with each moment, not by doing or thinking, but by being instantly aware.' 'Don't be a victim of your conceptual system, but the conqueror of your ignorance.... Don't force yourself to think it is the right time and right place for the arising of awareness, because awareness can arise any time or place... Don't limit it'. 'One is cut up with samuti sacca when there is no awareness of thinking.... cut up with thought.' 'Right understanding is not in the text, it's at the moment of understanding what seeing is.'

The more right understanding is developed the more it begins to see how much more clinging to self and clinging to a wrong idea of self there is than was ever considered possible when we first heard about the dhamma. Phra Dhammadhara pointed out how mostly 'we don't have kusala citta's. We may think we have a lot, but mostly we don't. We have ignorance, clinging, subtle clinging, medium clinging, sometimes gross clinging, certainly a lot of subtle clinging and subtle ignorance all the time. Now we are seeing, but seeing is not to be aware of anything, to think I am seeing is not to be aware of anything, because when there is awareness of a characteristic, that is not something or I'

During the discussions in Sri Lanka in 1977 someone mentioned that you can be aware that it is hard. Phra Dhammadhara asked 'what is it? We can be aware
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of hardness, hardness is not it, it is not it is hard, it is not something hard. If we think I am now aware of something that is hard, it's not awareness. If you think that now I am seeing, we are not developing right understanding at that moment. The purpose of being aware is to see that what appears is not a person or thing at all.....'

We read in the 'Kindred Sayings' (from the Pāli, I 135), that the nun Vajirā was harrassed with doubts by Māra, the Tempter or god of Death: What is a "person"? How does he arise? Who creates him? However, Vajirā understood that questions of this type are misleading and gave the following answer:

Why do you then harp on the word 'person'? Māra, you are starting from wrong premises. This is nothing but a lot of processes; no 'person' is found here. For just as the word 'carriage' is used when the parts are combined, so the word 'person' is commonly used when the factors are present.

We read that what is taken and clung to as self are the five aggregates or khandhas. We are told that 'these five aggregates of grasping, monk, have their root in desire.'

In the 'Kindred Sayings' (The Book on Aggregates, Full moon XXII, 82), we read:

.... Therefore, monks, any kind of form, whatever, whether past, future or present, in oneself or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all forms should be seen as it is with right understanding, thus: 'This is not mine, this am not I, this is not my self'. Any kind of feeling.... perception.... formations.... consciousness.... not my self.'

Thus seeing, the well-taught noble disciple becomes dispassionate towards form, becomes dispassionate towards feeling, becomes dispassionate towards perception, becomes dispassionate towards formations, becomes dispassionate towards consciousness. Being dispassionate he lusts not for it; not lusting he is liberated; when he is liberated, there comes the knowledge: "liberated". And he understands: 'Exhausted is birth, lived is the holy life, done is the task, there is nothing beyond this for (a designation of) the conditions of this existence.'

When one clings to something or self it brings unhappiness. Often when we feel unhappy we think in terms of some situation as our security, but we can begin to see what a false security it is. I mentioned this in a discussion with Khun Sujin in Bangkok and she urged others and myself to 'be satisfied with the present moment. It's the only security. Unhappiness is conditioned because one wants something. Be honest and see what one really wants. Is it worth it if one becomes so unhappy, always clinging to something that one doesn't get. Don't think of the others or compare. Feeling unhappy is such a waste of time when one is born as a manussa (human being). It's so foolish, so see what the right conditions are. Be a nobody and don't cling to name and fame. See the others with the wonderful house and job, but know that if there is no understanding, they can lose these at any time and be so unhappy.

So know one is happy with right understanding. The only real happiness is with kusala citta when one knows one's accumulations better from moment to moment. Be satisfied at this moment. Don't think about the future. Know how vipākā is conditioned. Who knows what will happen next? When one wants something, the wanting covers it up so one doesn't know whether it is worthwhile or not. Is it the real happy thing or is it only a trap or a snare designed in the form of happiness or pleasant feeling? No matter what it is, it cannot stay. One just wants the unstable thing. Nothing lasts, so why want the unstable thing? Know thinking as thinking and that this is all the plans and ideas are.'

I asked Khun Sujin in a conversation with her about the attachment and clinging to one's body when one is sick and minds so much without realising the danger. She talked about the danger or clinging to all rūpas and taking them for self. 'What do you want today, how many things, what are they if they are not rūpa? All rūpas (objects of experience) are objects of desire. Don't you want to see pleasant objects, this person or that person, pleasant things....? Don't you want to hear different sounds? Don't you want to smell the fragrant smell?

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Don't you want to taste only nice things?'

Khun Sujin continued to say one is so attached to what one takes for one's body, not just when one is sick. '...Wash it, clean it and not enough, never enough...more and more and more. Wanting to be attached more to all objects, to all rūpas, to all doorways. It's good that one doesn't wish for more than 6 doorways because one is so intoxicated by all 6 that one forgets to want to have another or many more....So it's a good reminder to begin to be aware of seeing and visible object now because one is always attached to them which is why it's the first doorway mentioned in the Tipitaka. One wants to develop right understanding of nāma and rūpa, so what about seeing now? They are here. Lobha does not let go. That's why sati and pannā have to be developed little by little, very gradually until they are strong enough to be aware and understand any reality when it appears before there can be more detachment.

One can see how dangerous rūpa is, because it's the object of attachment and only the anāgāmi eradicates attachment to sense objects. One begins to see that only awareness can eliminate lobha when it's aware of its characteristic when it appears. Otherwise there is no way to eradicate lobha. It's now and around, here and there, in the air as well, like a virus.....'

We read many times in the suttas about the sorrow that follows from the 'obsession' with the wrong idea that 'form' is self, or self as having form, or form as being in self or self as being in form....Even as he is so obsessed, that form changes, becomes otherwise, and owing to the change and transformation of form, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.' The same is said with respect to the feelings, perceptions, formations and consciousness. We read that 'the form of him who is not so obsessed, changes, becomes otherwise, but owing to the change and transformation of form there do not arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.' The same is said again with respect to the other khandhas and should be a reminder of the danger of the 'obsession' now.

We read in the 'Kindred Sayings' (The Cuck on the Sixfold Sphere of Sense, 'Not-including', XXXV 9.) that the Tathāgata 'having understood, as they really are, the arising, the passing away, the satisfaction, the misery and the escape from forms, - he delights not in forms, is not attached to forms, is not excited by forms. By the change, the fading away, and the cessation of forms, blissfully, monks, dwells the Tathāgata....So also of sounds, and the rest....blissfully, monks, dwells the Tathāgata.'

The Buddha adds:

Forms, sounds, smells, savours, touches, ideas,
All that's deemed desirable, charming and pleasant,
Of which they claim: 'it is' - and as far as their claim extends,
The world with its gods, holds all these as bliss,
And wherein they cease: 'That's the pain in them' - they say
As bliss the Ariyans saw, the curb on the self-hood bias
In contrast with the whole world is this vision of theirs.
What others spoke of in terms of woe,
That-as-bliss the saints have known.
Behold a Norm that's hard to comprehend
Baffled herein are the ignorant ones.'

Khun Sujin further stressed that when 'there is the wrong idea of self, it conditions other akusala. One is attached to oneself so much that one does not realise that whatever one is attached to, one is attached to self.' One thinks one is so attached to a person, but really one is attached to one's feeling, so one clings to one's defilements.' 'No matter how much one thinks, one cannot eradicate the idea of self....' 'One does not see the value of the eradication of self, because one clings to oneself all the time. When there is less the idea of self, one develops more pure kusala.... When there is less clinging to self, the weak points are detected.'

In Sri Lanka, Khun Sujin talked many times about the value of being a nobody. 'If one considers oneself very important, one must be very sorry if one does something wrong and one clings to one's kusala, because it always belongs to me and it indicates the clinging to self that one tries to eradicate it.' One begins to understand the meaning of development. It cannot develop in a day. It gradually develops

Khun Sujin continued to say that 'when one is a nobody, one forgets about oneself and one thinks of others, so it will come to be the condition for developing more kusala by not thinking about oneself.'.....'If one is so attached to oneself, one just does anything for oneself then, because one always thinks of oneself, but when one forgets oneself and one thinks of others, one can do more kusala for the others.... One sees the danger of being attached to oneself and how one will be very selfish and no one likes anyone who is selfish.... If it (the attachment to self) is not accumulated very much, it cannot appear through speech and body, but when it is accumulated, it will appear.'

Khun Sujin continued to point out the dangers of clinging to oneself. 'One is attached to oneself, to one's feeling, when one cares what the other thinks... We all want to be the object of attachment. We think of self and the world collapses with the idea of being a nobody. There is no seeing the value of no attachment which is the only real freedom from enslavement.'

Khun Sujin further reminds us that 'without satipatthāna, there is no way to eradicate the idea of self. One clings to kusala because it's my kusala.' This is why the Buddha urged us to develop right understanding. In the Mahā-Vagga (opening sections), we read that after the Buddha's enlightenment, Mucalinda, the serpent king, drew near the Buddha who speaks:

How blest the happy solitude
Of him who hears and knows the truth!
And self-restraint towards living beings!
How blest from passion to be free,
All sensuous joys to leave behind.
Yet far the highest bliss of all
To quit th'illusion false - 'I am'.

We have to be reminded many times that 'the development of satipatthāna is the development of understanding realities as anattā, not trying to do or trying to be aware. The development of sati is very natural because it performs its function whenever it arises, not trying or forcing....' The only way to eradicate the wrong understanding of self is to develop right understanding now. Khun Sujin further reminded us that 'this moment is so real. He satisfied and develop right understanding now.' Know it's the best cause and aim in life. Life is so short, so make the most of it and develop more understanding.'

Phra Dhammadhara suggested that seeing the lack of any alternative should be an incentive to begin now and begin again and again and make the development of satipatthāna one's top priority in life.... 'There has to be consideration of realities.' When? Not yesterday, because realities only appear now. So to know reality means to know reality right now.... It means considering it, studying it, recognising it for what it is, seeing that what one has heard about the present reality is true....' The more one understands how much clinging to the idea of self there is, the more one should see the urgency to develop more understanding.

It's helpful to remember at the same time that there is no instant result: In the 'Verses of Uplift' (The Elder Sona, V) we read:

Just as, monks, the mighty ocean flows down, slides and treads downward gradually, and there is no abrupt precipice, so also in this dhamma-discipline the training is gradual, the action is gradual, the procedure is gradual; there is no abrupt penetration of knowledge. Since this is so... this is the first strange and wonderful thing, seeing which monks take delight in this dhamma-discipline.

In Nina Van Gorkom's writings about the Cetasikas, I recently came across a reference she made to Potthapāda who listened to the Buddha but could not in the beginning give up his clinging to a self. Because I find it a particularly good reminder, I quote her... 'During the conversation he turned back several times to his belief in a self. Buddhagosa, in his commentary to the sutta, uses the simile of a pig which turns to the dirt again and again, although he has been bathed in scented water, anointed with perfumes, decked with garlands and laid to rest on the best bed. He likes dirt and does not think it unclean.'

It seems that most the time we like the 'dirt' and don't see anything 'unclean' in the clinging to our false idea of self. So we have to begin....NOW....with right understanding!